

IN THE PRESENCE OF GRIEF:
A RESOURCE FOR HELPING THE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION
RESPOND TO PERSONS IN THEIR EXPERIENCES OF GRIEF.

A Professional Project
Presented to
the Faculty of the School of Theology
at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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ABSTRACT

Grief, the normal human reaction to loss, is a time of great mental, physical and spiritual risk for persons. Grief is experienced in response to loss of relationships, to loss related to one's self, to loss of material objects, and to loss related to life stages and social systems.

The Christian commitment to compassion and caring requires that local congregations recognize the complex impact of loss upon persons and develop appropriate supportive styles of ministry to them.

The focus of this project is upon enabling a local congregation, its clergy and laity, to be more effective resources to persons experiencing loss and grief, through an exploration of psychological and social concepts of loss and grief, a review of theological implications for caring, and a presentation of practical applications to enable the congregation to fulfill its ministry.

INTRODUCTION

This project is a resource of concepts and programmatic suggestions to help the Christian congregation develop a ministry to and with persons experiencing grief reactions resulting from significant losses in their lives. For loss comes to everyone in the moments of daily living, sometimes so quietly that one only feels the slight discomfort of things being "not quite right" - and sometimes with an intensity that blocks all else out of awareness. Loss comes in many forms: loss of things, of persons, of personal functioning, of roles, of the familiar when one enters the untried or unknown. And whether loss be in the form of death, or of a child's favorite security blanket, or separation from persons and things that were valued, or of a cherished animal that had been "almost family," or of saying the ultimate goodbye to an acquaintance, a friend, a distant relative, or to one's closest life companion, such losses are ultimately only escaped by the event of one's own death. Loss is therefore woven into the fabric of life, and encounters with loss change the circumstances of our minutes and years and we are often drawn into a condition or state of being we call 'grief' or 'bereavement.'

Clinical studies reveal that the condition of grief and bereavement is a time of great mental, physical and spiritual risk for an individual. The object of this project is to learn how the Christian congregation can be effective as

a resource to individuals experiencing the pain of this high-risk time, and can enable them to manage the crisis in healthful, nurturing ways.

The Christian minister and congregation daily encounter persons experiencing grief reactions due to loss. Given the Christian commitment to compassion and caring for persons in need, it seems imperative that the church develop a thorough understanding of the impact of death and significant loss upon the psychological, spiritual and physical well-being of persons. Building on current psychological and social concepts of bereavement and grief, this project undertakes to offer practical applications for the Christian congregation's ministry with persons in the times of grief.

Of all the institutions and professions of our society, it is the religious community that is most often called upon in times of loss and grief. After the doctors and funeral directors have completed their responsibilities to the deceased, then the Pastor is called upon to "say a few words" about the one who has died and for the comfort of the survivors, and the congregation shares in the comforting through their presence at the services or through gifts of food and visits in the hours and days that follow.

In recent times, thanks to the pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, our society is coming to appreciate the value of openly communicating our feelings and thoughts about death and dying with one another. As part of this

opening into one of the most taboo subjects of our society, we are also being compelled to interact more openly and honestly with persons in their grief. It is my ambition to broaden and strengthen the means by which a local pastor and members of a congregation can provide positive help and support to persons as they grieve their losses and separations.

Chapter One will provide a basic understanding of the variety of losses that impact our lives. Chapter Two examines the components which tend to make up our reactions to such losses, reactions we commonly refer to as 'grief.'

Chapter Three will explore the implications of the Christian faith tradition for the caring congregation as it ministers to persons in grief. Chapter Four discusses the congregation's response to the issue of loss and grief through three traditional expressions of the church's life: preaching, teaching and serving.

The content of this project has grown out of the author's reading, from classes at Claremont School of Theology, and from over twenty-five years in pastoral ministry, serving congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma, Washington State, and Southern California. Underlying this work is a growing conviction that if the church will take seriously the impact of loss and its resulting grief reactions in persons' lives, it will provide a more wholistic and healthful ministry. The Church can,

in fact, provide a more biblical vision of the God who is present in the midst of life, suffering, and even in loss.

CHAPTER 1

THE IMPACT OF LOSS

Loss not death is the normative metaphor for understanding those experiences in human life that produce grief.¹

The Christian congregation's ministry in the presence of grief requires a recognition of the impact that loss has upon persons. Behind all grief there is a form of loss. Bertha Simos explained:

Loss is defined as being deprived of or being without something one has had and valued and includes the experience of separation. The term is applied both to the act of severance leading to the loss, as well as to a temporary loss and to the fear of loss. These experiences, loss, separation, and fear of loss, are universal to all people at every stage of the life cycle.²

Perhaps because persons are more accustomed to hearing about the dramatic losses that occur, especially losses resulting from death, there is a tendency to overlook many of the other loss experiences of life. "Loss touches everyone throughout life," reminds John Schneider, "yet its existence is frequently unrecognized, except in extreme cases

¹Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, All Our Loss, All Our Grievs (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 19.

²Bertha G. Simos, A Time to Grieve (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1979) 1.

such as death, war or disasters."³ How often is loss recognized as a part of a major promotion, a cross-country move, the fulfillment of a dream, or of the marriage of a child? Yet even these apparent causes for celebration mark a change in life as it was known, and harbor additional experiences of loss of that which was familiar. When one partner in a marriage accepts a transfer to a new position in a distant community, the entire family experiences loss of significant relationships and thus of personal identity. In fact, the family may experience even more intense loss than the one beginning the new job, for there will be some continuity within the framework of the organization providing the worker with a sense of familiarity. The family will face adjustments to a new community filled with strangers without the comfortable introductory bridge provided the worker. Recognizing that moving is a major source of risk, stress and loss, as well as a time of new adventure and growth, is vital if the experience is to work through to a happy ending for the entire family.

Retirement is another time when we tend to celebrate the person's achievement, yet often fail to consider the dimension of loss that may be involved in this life transition. Thus we become aware that even predictable life transitions expose persons to unexpected experiences of loss and grief.

³John Schneider, Stress, Loss and Grief (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1984) 4.

In the affluent middle and upper class American culture persons often seek to project a positive, success-oriented image, to be able to meet all challenges, and are reluctant to reveal any potential chinks in their armor such as fear or sorrow which others might view as a 'weakness.'

The tendency in today's society, and even within the Christian community, is to depreciate and belittle loss and the attendant feelings of grief. The over-all objective of this project is to persuade the church to look more carefully at the constellation of feelings called grief and grieving, and to accept the necessity of purposely relating to these feelings in honest, grief-relieving ways, rather than to deny the genuine pain that losses produce. Grief is too often seen as a kind of unfaithfulness, or as a lack of spiritual depth, when grief should be accepted as an authentic complex of feelings resulting from the common human experiences of loss and separation. For example, one may feel genuine sympathy when a friend's spouse dies, but after the proper rituals have been observed and a 'reasonable' period of time has passed, the expectation is that the survivor will get his/her self together and get on with life. Persons may find themselves becoming weary of those who can never seem to give up complaining and pining over their loss. Possibly this discomfort is related to an uncertainty about how to respond to someone experiencing unresolved grief.

It is not peculiar that persons may wish to preclude

or suppress the feelings that often accompany loss, because these are emotions which have negative connotations.

In grief, normal means feeling not happy rather than happy. In grief, what is normal goes contrary to what we usually think of as good adjustment, namely a rational approach to problem solving, the ability to cope with one's problem, a sense of organization and orderliness, an optimistic outlook, and the capacity to relate in a constructive way to other people.⁴

Helping persons accept and experience the feelings that follow the losses in their lives in ways that enable a healthy resolution of such experiences is a vital part of Christian community and ministry.

While not true today, in 17th Century London grief would be found listed among the categories used to classify the causes of death. The notion that psychological factors do affect our physical well-being is generally accepted, but is it possible that loss and grief can cause death? Colin Parkes reviews research on the relationship between bereavement and death of the bereaved by Michael Young and Rees and Lutkins.⁵ Young's study in London, 1983, found that among 4,486 males over age 54, whose spouses died during a two-month period in 1957, there was an increase in the death rate of almost 40 percent over the expected norm during the first

⁴Simos, 2.

⁵Colin Murray Parkes, Bereavement, Studies of Grief in Adult Life (New York: International Universities Press, 1972) 14-17.

six months of bereavement. The study by Reese and Lutkins in Wales (1967) resulted in further confirmation of a statistical relationship between loss by death of significant persons and the death of the bereaved. Additional studies on the cause of these deaths revealed that 75% of the increased deaths during the first six months of bereavement were caused by coronary thrombosis and arteriosclerotic heart disease. In reviewing these studies, Parkes is quick to point out that they do not prove that grief is itself a cause of death. It may be that grief only aggravates a condition that was already in the making.

Loss of a spouse is stressful and stress can produce changes in blood pressure and heart rate and could play a definite part in creating the conditions necessary for a heart attack. Further research may one day verify the old saying, "He died of a broken heart."

After having surveyed studies concerning the effects of bereavement upon the health of the bereaved, Parkes concludes there is:

...evidence that bereavement can affect physical health, and that complaints of somatic anxiety symptoms, headaches, digestive upsets and rheumatism are likely, ...in widows and widowers in middle age...also there are some potentially fatal conditions, such as coronary thrombosis, blood cancers, cancer of the neck of the womb, which seem to be precipitated or aggravated by major loss.⁶

⁶Parkes, 22.

John Schneider reports that not only are there risks for the survivor when loss occurs by death of a spouse, but studies at the University of Rochester have established a significant relationship between illness which occurs after a person has experienced actual or threatened loss of job, life goals, or highly-valued persons or objects (political figures, entertainment idols, a home). Schneider refers to studies by Green (1958, 1959), Engel (1961), and earlier pioneering work by Lindemann (1944) following the Coconut Grove Restaurant fire and disaster, which established significant connections between loss and the onset of leukemia, lymphoma and the onset or reoccurrence of ulcerative colitis.⁷

While the studies reviewed in this area do not lead to a simple cause-and-effect relationship between significant losses and illness, whether physical or mental, the evidence does give strong support to the wholistic concept that what affects one dimension of a person's life has impact on the whole person. Loss is hazardous to human health and well-being; therefore it must be given serious recognition and attention in the Christian community and the larger society.

Loss affects the total person: emotionally, physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. Loss also comes in many forms and often with multiple aspects. For a more systematic presentation of the various types of loss, I have grouped loss into four basic categories: 1) loss of rela-

⁷Schneider, 12.

tionships, 2) loss related to oneself, 3) loss of material objects, and 4) loss related to life stages and social systems.

Loss of Relationships

The first conscious awareness of loss for many people comes during childhood when a first "best friend" moves away, or when an aged grandparent dies and one sadly recognizes that one of significance has gone from the circle of relationships. Life and living encompass a complex of attachments to and separations from other human beings through each stage of life, from womb to grave. Through our lives pass a steady stream of persons, many we hardly know, a few we live with in the most intimate of ways, but sooner or later we are separated from them all. These losses are an inescapable part of our human lives. They occur through divorce, physical separation, accident, illness, rejection, advanced age, natural and manmade tragedy, imprisonment and death. Significant to the grief that comes from such loss of relationship is the intensity and ratio of both positive and negative feelings held toward the person who is gone. No amount of love can keep a person forever by one's side. Nor would feeling hatred toward another person remove the possibility of experiencing grief when that person is gone. Recognition of the ratio of love and hate in a relationship broken by loss is a key element in healthy grief work. While relationships

are ended because of a variety of causes, death is generally the most intensely experienced loss. Grief over a relationship lost through death evokes a variety of emotions: pain, anger, guilt, rejection, even relief. Finding ways to acknowledge and express these feelings is a fundamental element in the grief process.

Loss Related to Self

Another devastating category of loss is the grief experienced when one loses a part or aspect of oneself, whether it be a physical, psychological or social loss.

Structural and functional losses from accident, disease or the aging process cause changes in body image, mobility, autonomy and self-esteem, and may result in intense grief.

Intrapsychic losses are equally powerful in evoking grief. These losses are internal, and may often be in the form of secret dreams or ambitions that have never been shared with another person. Idealized notions of marriage, romance, or of one's profession may all be occasions for grief as they are tested against the realities of daily life.

Social loss occurs when a person's status or role is dramatically affected by such events as retirement from a life-long vocation, divorce or death of one's spouse, promotion to a position of greater responsibility, or any event which significantly alters a person's public identity.

Revisiting the community where one was born may lead to grief experiences when one finds the neighbors have changed, or the house where one was born has disappeared; one's past life experiences are thus not confirmed and the personal identity is confused and threatened.

Loss of Material Objects

Most people have attachments to favorite things they would not like to lose. These material objects may be very valuable, or have very little economic worth. They may be irreplaceable (such as photographs). Nevertheless we are attached to them and what they represent, and their loss would cause us pain.

The grief evoked by the loss of a favorite object may arise from the identification we have made between the object and some significant person in our life. When my family eats the last jar of my deceased mother's watermelon pickles, one more tangible expression of her loving presence will disappear from our home. I have no doubt that the special tablecloth she made for us will seem just a little more important when all the pickles are gone.

Our pets may be regarded as possessions, yet because we tend to speak of and relate to pets as though they are human, we experience intense grief over their loss. Death of a pet is often one of a child's first and most traumatic losses. A child also experiences loss and real pain when a

favorite toy breaks and Daddy cannot "fix it," or when the precious security blanket finally wears out, or the first time a balloon pops, or when the child innocently tosses a kitten into the air like a stuffed toy and its neck is broken.

The parent's behavior and attitude toward the child at these times of loss will have influence upon the youngster's first feelings of grief. As children tend to be more overt and expressive of feelings, the parental acceptance or rejection of these feelings will either encourage or discourage future expressions of grief as the child grows and faces other losses in life. And thus the child internalizes what his parent figures communicate is "okay" or "not okay" to feel and to express at times of loss.

Loss Related to Life Stages and Social Systems

Loss occurs in the normal development of life and in the evolution of the social systems in which we live. Each new step of growth and change for us as human beings is built upon giving up or leaving behind a familiar object or self-image. When the baby develops the ability to drink independently from a glass and to eat solid food, he also experiences the loss of the comfort of the mother's breast. Graduation from high school signals the passing of familiar routines of our school days, and while society celebrates this accomplishment with festive rituals, some youth experience

graduation as a time of loss and confusion and resent the new expectations placed upon them. Young adults experience the loss of personal freedom when they choose a specific career and exclude other possibilities, or decide to share life with one person, or assume the responsibilities of parenthood with its accompanying loss of time and resources for personal pleasures. Later stages in life bring possible loss of physical mobility or health, and changes affecting judgment, memory and decision-making powers.⁸

Human beings tend to live in a variety of social and interacting systems that develop dependable or at least predictable patterns of behavior. Workers on an assembly line may experience the loss of the need for skills they have developed over a lifetime because of advances in automation that change or completely eliminate their familiar jobs. When my oldest son moved from home to live with friends, the whole family experienced feelings of pain and emotions of grief that we had not anticipated as we experienced a change within our family system and realized that life would never be the same again. We recognized that within this normal, to-be-expected development of our children growing up and "going out on their own" there is even there a kind of loss and grief to be worked through.

⁸Simos, 13-18.

Loss often comes in multiple forms. A woman experiences her husband's death as the primary, initial loss, but is soon confronted with additional losses in her personal life as a result of his death: her role has changed and she is no longer a wife but is now a widow, a 'single'; her financial circumstances may have been radically altered with resulting stresses and adjustments; she may also experience intrapsychic losses, dependent upon the degree to which her identity was bound up with that of her spouse. Loss is often such a many-sided pain.

Additional Variables in Loss

In addition to the four major types of loss, other factors and circumstances add to the unpredictable nature of one's grief reactions. Such variables include the ways we have learned to handle powerful emotions and feelings throughout our lives.

Mitchell and Anderson⁹ illustrate additional variables and dimensions of loss experiences which are summarized in the remainder of this section.

While many losses will be unavoidable, there are losses that result from particular choices and life-styles, and may be thought of as being avoidable. Separations or

⁹Mitchell and Anderson, 46-51.

death between "secret lovers", accidents resulting from careless driving, and drug abuse can be seen as situations which might have been avoided given the making of other choices. Losses that result from human choice are just as intense and real, and in need of our support, as grief that results from any unavoidable losses. In fact, there may be even more intense and acute feelings of guilt and resentment on such occasions of avoidable loss.

Care must be taken in the recognition of loss not to confuse losses which are temporary with those which are permanent. When permanent losses are sometimes fancitized as being "only temporary" the grieving work can be delayed and hindered. Such may happen in the case of a drowning when the body is never found, or found only after several days; the survivor may be prone to hope that somehow the loss will only be temporary.

Another important variable in losses caused by death is the extent of anticipation that is possible before the actual loss. The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one has a different impact than death that comes after prolonged illness, or even after only a brief period of anticipation. Knowing that one's loved one is going to die affords the opportunity to accomplish some the grieving jointly. Open communication that enables the sharing of real feelings, and the potential for repairing strained or broken relationships, can be beneficial to both the dying and the bereaved. It

seems inhuman to treat our dying loved ones to some kind of facadical relationship because we think it will make their burden greater if we let them see a little of the pain we experience at their leaving. The nurturing of open and loving communication between the living as well as between the living and the dying is always a vital part of the church's ministry with persons.

Let us also be aware that loss can be experienced differently, depending on whether we are the one leaving a relationship or the one being left. Feeling resentful at being left is a frequent experience of survivors even in a case of death. Guilt, on the other hand, may be a strong feeling with persons who leave home, or a marriage, or a job, or a love relationship.

Summary

Loss, in any form, whether related to things, relationships, or very significant persons, is at base a loss of a part of our self. Our lives are formed so much by the many attachments we make, and loss represents a taking away of some part of our personal totality.

Loss is inescapably painful precisely because attachment is a human necessity. Our attachment to objects other than human beings is a recognition not only that the unconscious continues to be indiscriminate throughout adulthood, it is also an affirmation of our linkage with the

whole of creation that God has given us as a sacred trust. To be human is to be a griever for all kinds of losses.¹⁰

Aware that losses come in all shapes and sizes, and that the recognition and identification of our losses is important to our total well-being and growth, we now turn to consider grief - the reaction we have to loss.

¹⁰Mitchell and Anderson, 51-52.

CHAPTER 2

A RESPONSE CALLED GRIEF

...bereavement (grief) is a universal and integral part of our experience of love."¹

C. S. Lewis

Grief must be taken seriously by those persons, professional or lay, who have concern and commitment for the needs and growth of human beings. Few persons willingly choose to be present with another in their intimate moments of grief. Yet such needs surround us, and such caring can be one of the most loving gifts that can be given to another human being. Frequently the intense pain and emotional distress expressed by the bereaved generates such feelings of awkwardness and uneasiness in us that we take the first available opportunity to leave or to change the grieving person's emotional mood. At times the person in grief is so aware of our awkwardness that he self-imposes limits on his painful feelings to lessen the discomfort of those who came to "help" him. It becomes clear that we must understand the nature of grief and of the grieving process so that our helping can be effective and freeing, rather than adding to the burden of the bereaved.

¹C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed (New York: Seabury Press, 1961) 41.

Defining Grief

Loss with its accompanying grief is recognized as a universal experience and often is the subject of writers, both sacred and secular, throughout history. In recent decades the scientific community has increased its interest and concern for learning more about the nature of grief. An early observer of grief, Darwin was impressed by the vulnerability of both animals and human beings when experiencing loss.²

In common useage, terms like bereavement, mourning and grief tend to be used interchangeably. However, distinctions can be made between these terms, especially bereavement. Fulton indicates that bereavement refers more to "the social proscriptions, injunctions, expectations and demands placed upon one who is designated or assumes the role of a bereaved person."³ Grief and mourning refer to psychological and physical processes that are activated in response to a loss.

Sigmund Freud in "Mourning and Meloncholia" considered mourning to be the regular reaction to the loss of a significant person or other entity, as one's country, an ideal, or a relationship in which one's libido was invested. Freud considered mourning to be a departure from the normal

²Charles Darwin, The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals (1872), Cited in John Schneider, Stress, Loss and Grief (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1984) 79.

³Robert Fulton (ed.) Death and Identity (Bowie, MD: Charles Press, 1976) 179.

attitude toward life, but did not regard it as pathological or in need of medical treatment. He describes the traits of mourning as: a painful frame of mind; a loss of interest in the outside world; a loss of the capacity to adopt a new object of love; and a turning away from activities not connected with thoughts of the deceased person. The work of mourning, for Freud, consisted of the ego reclaiming the psychic energy or libido invested in the person who died. Thus mourning was seen as the process and time needed for the ego to free its energy from the lost object and to check out the new reality in which it now found itself.⁴

Later in his career, Freud brought his ideas on mourning together with his ideas on anxiety and affirmed that loss or the threat of loss can often be the key to understanding anxiety.⁵

John Bowlby, who did extensive studies on the behavior of animals and human infants, developed an attachment theory which contributes to our definition and understanding of grief. In Bowlby's theory, the goal of attachment behavior is to maintain an affectual bond between two members of a species. Therefore any situation that seems to endanger or threaten that bond will elicit actions which are intended

⁴Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1957) XIV.

⁵John Schneider, Stress, Loss and Grief (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1984) 4.

to restore or preserve the bond. Actions such as clinging, crying, and angry coercion are forms of attachment behaviors designed to attract attention and protect a relationship.⁶

Bowlby defines mourning as "referring to all the psychological process conscious and unconscious that are set in train by loss."⁷

Patrick Mullahy, in his major review of the contributions of H. S. Sullivan to interpersonal psychiatry, defines grief as "the way by which we detach our integrating tendencies from a lost significant person."⁸

Edgar Jackson evolves his definition of grief as that "emotion that is involved in the work of mourning, whereby a person seeks to disengage himself from the demanding relationship that has existed and to reinvest his emotional capital in new and productive directions for the health and welfare of his future life in society."⁹ Here grief is defined more as an emotion or emotional state of being which Jackson then contrasts and compares with other emotional states such as shock, anxiety and depression.

⁶John Bowlby, Attachment and Loss (New York: Basic Books, 1980) III, 42.

⁷Bowlby, III, 18.

⁸Patrick Mullahy, Psychoanalysis and Interpersonal Psychiatry (New York: Science House, 1970) 311.

⁹Edgar N. Jackson, Understanding Grief (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957) 18.

Current researchers and writers on grief are more inclined to define grief in terms of a process rather than an emotional state. John Schneider has worked out a holistic model of the grieving process, drawn from an extensive study of major grief theories. He defines grief as "a process of discovering the extent of what was lost...and the extent of what was not lost or what can now take place."¹⁰

I would define grief as the composite process for the total human response of recognition, acceptance and resolution of any loss in a person's life.

Grief As Process

Understanding grief as a process is vital if ministry to the bereaved is to be effective, for being attuned to the moods, movement and changes in the grief expression is to be able to perceive the well-being of the bereaved and to move with them through the different levels and expressions of their grief.

Grief as a process is influenced by many different factors. The type of loss, whether it is sudden and unexpected or it comes as a welcome relief from pain, will alter the character of the grieving. While grief responses have common elements, still the unique style of emotional expression of individuals who grieve will partly determine their

¹⁰Schneider, 59.

behavior. Culture and tradition also effect how one expresses grief. For example, in American society it is more readily accepted, and perhaps expected, that women will weep in public while men are expected to be more controlled, more stoic. Family systems also determine grief patterns. Thus grief is affected by multiple factors unique to each situation of loss.

Grief is a complex of ordinary human emotions which are incited in response to a loss. Three major theoretical approaches to the nature of grief contribute important elements to aid our understanding of this human process: separation anxiety theory, grief as a function of our attachment instincts, and grief as a process of realization.

Separation anxiety theory observes that the symptoms of acute grief behavior are very similar to those of a classic anxiety attack. Symptoms of restlessness, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, increased heart and pulse rate, shortness of breath and nervousness are often experienced in the earlier stages of grief, or even in anticipatory forms of grief which occur before an impending loss actually happens. Separation anxiety is related to early life experiences and personality development, such as the trauma of birth and early fears related to being abandoned by one's mother figure. "The pain of loss is the pain of separation. Every grief

echoes and to some extent relives our infantile fear of abandonment."¹¹

A second theory about the nature of grief observes that grief is a function of our attachment instincts. John Bowlby and others who have studied young children and animals to understand the function of instincts and behaviors that appear to be part of their inborn natures believes attachment to be a basic instinct.¹² Attachment refers to bonding that occurs when one's psychic energy is invested in other persons or objects. The intensity of a loss experience is related to the nature and strength of the attachment to the lost object or person. What this theory suggests is that grief is not just a response to a loss but is a reaction determined by the nature of the attachment of the bereaved to the loss. This understanding of grief as a function of attachment has implications for the church and its ministry with persons in times of grief and in all interpersonal relationships.

An implication of attachment theory for ministry with the bereaved relates to the recognition that attachment feelings are usually ambivalent. The emotional energy invested in an attachment to another person is most commonly considered to be love, but it may also include feelings of fear, resentment, hate or indifference. In order for the bereaved to be

¹¹Scott R. Sullender, Grief and Growth (New York: Paulist Press, 1972) 41.

¹²John Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, Cited in Sullender, 30-36.

freed from the intense pain caused by a loss it is often necessary for a variety of intense feelings to be recognized and expressed. Common tendencies of religious (and even non-religious) circles to apply moral judgments on a person's feelings must be avoided; i.e., "It is acceptable to feel sad but not acceptable to be angry about one's loss, especially if that loss was of someone who was loved." Or, "How can you be sad? Just think, your dear one doesn't suffer anymore and is with God!" The attachment theory of grief helps to focus on grief as what is really happening to the bereaved and not what happened to the deceased.

The third major theoretical framework for understanding grief views grief as a process of realization. Grief is that process by which the bereaved is enabled to accept the reality of the loss and of the new reality made necessary by this disruption in one's life. "Grief is a process of realization, of 'making real' the fact of loss."¹³ As this process is completed, the bereaved becomes able to participate in the new reality without continually experiencing the pain of the loss.

The process of grief begins at the initial time of loss and progresses toward the construction and acceptance of a new life situation or new reality and will be experienced as alternating periods of pain and relief. Just as one can

¹³Colin Murray Parkes, Bereavement (New York: International Universities Press, 1972) 156.

not look indefinitely at the sun, neither can one constantly confront the painful reality of a loss. So in the process of grief, periods of pain are experienced as one faces the hard reality of the loss, and periods of relief are enjoyed when, with the aid of one's defense mechanisms, one looks away from the pain. The psychological side of the self has a limited tolerance for pain, just as the nervous system does, but instead of causing one to pass out in the face of intense pain, the psyche protects by leading the sufferer to employ psychological devices called defense mechanisms.

Much popular psychology of recent years has focused on the negative aspects of defense mechanisms, charging that they tend to block maturity of the personality. However, in grief the mechanisms provide periods of relief and rest between the attacks of pain. Those who desire to assist others experiencing grief will do well to respect the periods of psychic retreat instead of attempting to lead the bereaved to confront the reality of their loss. These defenses, such as periodic regression back in time to before the loss occurred, do not block the healing process unless they become a permanent psychic state for the bereaved. Healing grief is grief which gradually diminishes the intensity of the pain of a loss and enables the bereaved to accept and to construct a new reality for one's life.

Elements of Grief and Grieving

The practical goal of this project is to help congregations recognize the impact that loss and grief have upon the lives of individuals and upon a community of persons seeking to be faithful to the Christian tradition, and to consider how both pastor and congregation can be more effective in ministry with the bereaved. Therefore, several essential elements for the planning and fulfillment of Christian ministry need to be uplifted.

Grief is the normal human response to loss. It is not a disease. There are common elements in the grief experiences but the symptomatic reactions are not predictable because grief is a highly personalized response to loss affected by many variables. Age, religious beliefs, personality structure, and the intensity of the relationship to the object of loss all contribute to make each grief a unique experience. Those in grief must be approached with respect for the variables of each situation. This requires reaching out with an empathetic detachment which communicates that the minister is feeling with them, but not attempting to deprive them of either the reality or intensely personal nature of their feelings. The minister serves as a point of reality for them, a touchstone of security, in their moments of confusion of feelings, sharing the pain but not relieving them of the right and need to express personal grief and to begin to work out the pain. The minister's mere presence serves as

a reminder that though the loss may be permanent, life and relationships do go on, and the grief process will not have to last forever.

Grief is spiral shaped. Beginning at the point of the loss with its emotional shock and acute pain, the griever progresses in a circular movement which from time to time brings him back to a point directly above the starting and many of the initial feelings burst out again. This is very likely to occur during special holidays or on an anniversary of a time which had special meaning for the bereaved and the one lost. The further one moves away from the loss, the less powerful these emotions become, although they may never completely fade. The spiral model provides a meaningful image for talking about the process of grief, allowing for the unpredictability of emotions and also offering a sign of hope for the successful completion of the grief work.¹⁴

Grief is temporarily self-centered. Persons in grief need to have opportunity, at least momentarily, to shut out the rest of the world while they face the initial shock waves of their pain and loss. This does not mean that the person should be left alone; it does mean allowing the bereaved some time to get started on his grief work before the usual social

¹⁴Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, All Our Losses, All Our Grievs (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 91.

pressures or economic necessity push him back into the social world. Temporary withdrawal and tending to one's intrapersonal experience is an important part of the healing process and should not be viewed as unhealthy escapism unless it becomes a long-term condition.¹⁵

Grief is work because it is a hard and painful experience which takes a lot of energy. More importantly, the term 'work' indicates that in the grief process certain tasks need to be accomplished, and how those tasks are handled directly impact the final outcome or resolution of the grief.

Grief was seen as a series of stages or steps by early researchers in the field. Westberg listed ten steps: shock, expression of emotion, depression, physical symptoms of distress, panic, guilt, anger, immobilization, hope, and affirmation of reality.¹⁶ Researchers in more recent times tend to favor a shorter and more generalized list. John Bowlby lists three stages: urge to recover lost object (weeping and anger), despair (later called disorganization), and reorganization directed toward a new object.¹⁷ Current writers do not focus on sequential stages of grief but on a dynamic process in which specific issues must be faced, or

¹⁵Mitchell and Anderson, 93-94.

¹⁶Granger Westberg, Good Grief (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1962).

¹⁷Sullender, 55.

certain tasks accomplished, to result in a healthy, successful continuation of life for the bereaved. Today even the term 'grief work' sounds somewhat mechanical for such an intimate human experience. Regardless of the terms used, there is the need for persons experiencing grief because of loss to progress through some common phases or changes in order to survive with minimal harmful effects.

Howard Clinebell identified five major tasks in grief work: 1) accepting the reality of the loss, 2) re-experiencing and re-telling the pain and story of the loss, 3) putting one's life back together by accepting new identity or learning new living or vocational skills, 4) putting this loss into the larger context of life and faith meanings, and 5) reaching out to others who have suffered loss.¹⁸

Grief is not completed in any prescribed length of time. Grief is goal oriented, and though the goal may never be completely reached, the successful resolution of the grief process depends upon how close one comes. The goal of one's grieving includes: reducing the ways in which the bereaved's daily living is limited by attachments to the person or object lost; enabling the bereaved to make new emotional attachments; formulating appropriate memories of the person

¹⁸Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Class lecture on 'Grief', AM 381, "Spirit-Centered Holistic Healing and Health Through the Life Stages," School of Theology at Claremont, 1985.

or object lost; and being able to share those memories without being overcome by emotions.¹⁹

¹⁹Mitchell and Anderson, 86.

CHAPTER 3

FAITH AND THE CARING COMMUNITY

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

St. Paul¹

Faith and Grief

The Christian congregation that seeks to be supportive to persons in their experiences of loss and grief must be aware of its basic theological resources and of their implications for the life-style and ministry of its fellowship.

To accomplish this task, three areas will be explored: 1) the nature of faith as described by Paul Tillich; 2) the responses of Christian theology to three key issues in the definition of grief (recognition, acceptance, resolution); and 3) the nature of the caring community's response to these needs as expressed in the concept of agape, and three basic characteristics of the community defined in Dietrick Bonhoeffer's Life Together.²

As a Pastor I was unprepared by my seminary education for the shocking discovery that some persons tend to withdraw from their church fellowship and its activities

¹Galatians 6:2 (Revised Standard Version).

²Dietrick Bonhoeffer, Life Together (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

when they are experiencing personal troubles and grief. I could not understand why persons who had been regular in worship attendance, had participated in other church activities, and who appeared dependable and enthusiastic about their church, suddenly turned it all off when loss entered their lives. Didn't they realize that the church was one place where they could really confront the dark side of life? Did they blame God for their loss, or feel that there was no reason to continue in the church since all their participation had not prevented pain from entering their lives? Had their church activities been a kind of insurance policy against trouble? Or could it be that they felt that sorrow, anger, guilt, and feelings of despair just did not fit or would not be acceptable to all those bright, smiling faces at Sunday morning worship?

I have come to believe that the problem was even more basic than all these popular reasons -- it usually involved the core of a person's beliefs about God. In spite of the persistent myth of popular religion that "It doesn't matter what you believe, just so you believe in God," in times of crisis persons find that what they believe about God impacts directly upon how they deal with and feel about the crisis itself. The question to be faced is not whether or not one believes in God, but what is the nature of the God one believes in?

Even prior to the question about the nature and

characteristics of God is the question: What is faith? Paul Tillich has contributed much to clarify our thinking about the nature of faith with his definition that faith is "a state of being ultimately concerned."³ Tillich's exploration of faith as ultimate concern helps separate faith as a dynamic state of being totally committed from the content of our ultimate concerns. "Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements."⁴

This very inclusive and dynamic concept of faith holds in tension the conflicting and paradoxical dimension of the human personality. Defining faith as ultimate concern helps us avoid endless arguments about faith as being constituted of a certain knowledge, emotion or historical perspective.

Faith as ultimate concern encompasses that which gives meaning and purpose to our lives. It includes our values and what we consider to be most important and essential. In Tillich's concept of faith the content of our ultimate concern is not essential to the definition or understanding of the dynamics of faith. The content of one's ultimate concern may be the God of the Bible, it may be personal

³Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 1.

⁴Tillich, 4.

success, or it may be the nation in which one lives. Whatever the content, its impact upon the life of the believer will be crucial.

Significant loss, such as death of a spouse or child, loss of a home, loss of role or function in society, is often experienced as a crisis of faith. In fact, the experience of loss may be the occasion in which a person becomes more fully aware of the content of one's ultimate concern. Often the beliefs a person professes about God are critically tested by suffering and loss. The theological challenge for an effective ministry with the dying and the bereaved is the challenge of forging a meaningful pastoral theodicy. By theodicy is meant those attempts in which we seek "to speak about God (theos) with justice (dike) precisely at those points at which the divine purpose seems most implausible and questionable, namely, amid suffering."⁵

What we are seeking is not only solid intellectual answers but a response and approach to the questions that cry out from the depths of suffering and grief. If God is just and all powerful and loving, then why suffering? If all God can do is sympathize with us in the midst of tragedy, then who or what in creation contains the power that can help us find meaning and purpose in life? An honest effort to re-

⁵Thomas C. Oden, Pastoral Theology, Essentials of Ministry (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 223.

spond to these questions is part of the caring community's theological responsibility.

Oden reminds us that the classic problem of theodicy was and is to find ways to fully affirm three basic premises: "God is unsurpassably good. God is incomparably powerful. Suffering and evil nonetheless exist. Why?"⁶

How to relate and honestly maintain the three sides of this triangle is as vital today as it was in ancient times. The church's tradition contains much for us to consider, for the question of suffering and God's power is raised in both the Old and New Testament canons: in Jeremiah 12:1-2, "Why has the way of the wicked prospered?" and in Mark 15:34, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Oden reviews the basic points of no less than twelve of the most classical pastoral attempts to deal with this issue,⁷ but no single one of these arguments explain everything nor do any of them put an end to suffering. However, they do help us understand more about the nature of the being we call God and the realities and interconnectedness of finite existence.

The defense of free will is one of the more common theodicies which helps us understand more about the goodness and power of God and the nature of finite freedom. Freedom carries with it the possibility of abuse, and suffering does

⁶Oden, 224.

⁷Oden, 226-244.

result from the social and individual abuse of free will. The finite freedom which God has given and which might appear to be a self-imposed limitation on God's goodness and power can really be seen as a positive witness to these aspects of divinity. Only an all-powerful God can take such a risk as to create historical beings with such radical freedom. Thus God, who transcends this creation and history with its freedom that allows for the event of evil and suffering, is also the God who continues to struggle against the creation's abusive use of freedom.

Tillich reminds us that in our devotional and relational life with God the two main symbolic spheres by which we relate to God, that of God as Lord and God as Father, are not to be seen as conflicting images but as manifestations of God's being. The concept 'Lord' expresses the holy power, the distance between God and creation. The concept 'Father' expresses the holy love, the unity between God and creation. If the content of our faith does not include both concepts, then our image of God is less than complete. The image of 'Lord' alone can become a tyranny, while the image of 'Father' alone tends to become sentimentality.⁸

Now we turn to identify those theological concepts drawn from the life of Jesus which address the existential issues common to the grief process.

⁸Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) I, 286-288.

In the manifestation of Christ in our created existence we meet God as Lord and as Father, and we meet Christ as Son and as Brother.⁹ The confession of Jesus as the Christ, the God-sent-one, focuses our attention on how God participates in this historical creation. As we observe Jesus through the eyes of the Gospel writers and of the early church community, we become aware of God's involvement, encountering the abuse of freedom by sinful man, and encouraging responsible choice of a lifestyle of love and justice.

In the previous chapter, grief was defined as a process involving recognition, acceptance and resolution of loss in a person's life.

Recognition coincides in grief with the initial impact or shock of a loss. Many different emotions may be expressed but the dominant state is one of anxiety resulting from the separation and threatening radical change in one's life style. In an extreme case, as in death of a spouse who was one's primary source of love and security, the loss may be perceived as a direct attack on the content of a person's faith. The theological issue here is the need for the courage to be, the need to be heard and sustained in a time when basic life trust has been threatened or attacked. Here the model of Jesus, praying in great anxiety in the garden

⁹Tillich, Systematic Theology, I, 289.

(Mark 14:32-34), and enduring the overwhelming sense of abandonment on the cross (Mark 15:34), can be cathartic paradigms of our own experience. And perhaps in this initial period of recognition of loss we need to hear and sense that "we are not alone in our struggles, (II Corinthians 1:1-8); and that our God promises to be with us in our struggles. (Phillipians 3:10)."¹⁰

As the grief process moves toward acceptance of the loss, the energy invested in the attachment begins to be regained by the ego. There is a lessening of emotional pain and the beginning of the creation of memories and the establishment of perspective. Perhaps now the ambiguities of the relationship become more acceptable. A healthy resolution of grief requires honesty and realistic balance in the memory making. Here the theology of grace is needed. Here is the place for the sola fide (faith alone) doctrine to be manifest. Here, in Tillich's words, we experience:

the ultimate source of the power which heals by accepting the unacceptable,...The acceptance by God, his forgiving or justifying act, is the only and ultimate source of a courage to be which is able to take the anxieties of guilt and condemnation into itself.¹¹

As the grief process moves from the initial shock of loss toward acceptance, a critical part of the process becomes the expression and identification of our feelings about

¹⁰Oden, 225.

¹¹Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) 166.

the loss. In recognizing and accepting a loss a person may experience intense feelings of anger toward God, other persons, and even toward the lost person (as in a death or divorce.) The bereaved may also feel very guilty about feeling anger because there are many voices in our culture that support the notion that it is wrong to be angry with God or the dead.

A positive approach to anger is to accept and express it, to work with the anger until some resolution is found. This is a more productive approach than today's common tendency to deny or hide our anger, or to separate ourselves from what we consider to be the source of our anger.

God can be approached in anger as well as in love and obedience if God is understood as being beyond all our gods and ideas of god, as the inclusive ground and power of being who is able to overcome our anger through acceptance and grace. God heals by accepting and absorbing our anger, even anger toward God, just as God absorbed evil and death in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, thus overcoming the abuses of finite freedom and transforming them into new life. Thus "the Cross stands as the central effective manifestation of God's taking the abusive consequences of finite freedom upon himself."¹²

¹²Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, II, 176.

As grief proceeds toward resolution, the realization grows that one is now faced with the demands and circumstances of a new reality. The death of a spouse especially confronts the bereaved with the need for a reorganization of one's life style. New patterns of behavior will be formed as new relationships are established, both with new and old friends.

The content of belief needed for the final phase of the grief process as the new life style of the bereaved begins to take shape is the concept of divine love. This divine love is manifest in the conditions of existence in Jesus the Christ.¹³ This love is the power that can help the bereaved reconstruct their lives, gain confidence and trust to live through grief, absorb the pain and begin to participate in the new reality of their lives.

At such a time, the Christian message of reconciliation and resurrection take on special meaning. Christian theology often proclaims Jesus as 'the one for others' who, in Paul's words, breaks down the dividing walls of hostility between persons and between persons and God. Cannot Jesus also be an agent of intrapersonal reconciliation, helping the grieved formulate a new self-image through trust in Christ's acceptance of them in their new state?

¹³Tillich, Systematic Theology, I, 286.

The Christian affirmation of resurrection speaks to grief as a symbol of hope in two ways. When the loss comes by death, the resurrection to new life in Jesus Christ may provide comfort to one in grief and assurance regarding the promise of resurrection also for the deceased loved one. As the grief process progresses to the phases of resolution and transformation, the resurrection may become a sign of new life possibilities for the bereaved.

The resurrection stands as a symbol of the divine assurance that, in the Apostle Paul's words, "nothing...in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹⁴

The Caring Community

Basic Christianity is essentially the event of Jesus, his life and ministry, which resulted in the creation of a new community of believers. The interpretation of the event of Jesus as an act of God, revealing power and grace, fulfilling ancient promises of Judaism that God would send the Messiah, and issuing an invitation to all peoples to join in a new covenant with God is the risk dimension of the Christian tradition. This tradition encompasses both the events of Jesus' life and ministry and the significance and meaning which those events hold for those New Testament believers who

¹⁴Romans 8:31-39.

accept the nature of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ.

Paul's letter to the church in Galatia is sometimes called the Magna Charta of Christian Liberty because it sets forth principles which identify Christianity as a world religion and not another Jewish sect.¹⁵ In Galatians 6:2 Paul provides a practical application of his letter's earlier theological teachings when he describes the function of the caring community, of the Church, as to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." And what is the law of Christ? Paul speaks of freedom and love in Galatians, Chapter 5, and he specifically states:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'¹⁶

So Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18, the same source Jesus quoted when he was quizzed about what he considered the greatest commandment of the law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.¹⁷

To come to know the God who demands total commitment is to know love by being loved and by loving. God's love for

¹⁵New Oxford Annotated Bible, 1410.

¹⁶Galatians 5:13-14.

¹⁷Matthew 22:37-40.

us is revealed in Jesus the Christ, who gave love to his companions and disciples and who incites them to love others. In the existential level of life love comes to us in the neighbor who cares. Jesus and Paul both call the Church to recognize that 'to love one's neighbor as oneself' is an essential part of our nature as a Christian community.

Gene Outka explores in great depth the commandment regarding loving the neighbor. While discussing Karl Barth's views on agape, Outka includes a quotation from Barth's Dogmatics defining his view of loving the neighbor.

...agape as neighbor-love means identification with his interests in utter independence of the question of his attractiveness, of what he has to offer, of the reciprocity of the relationship, or repayment in the form of a similar self-giving.¹⁸

This understanding of what it means to love the neighbor has particular application in the church's ministry with those in grief. It challenges us to accept that in grief persons may not be pleasant to be around. The pain and anguish expressed in tears and other intense feelings may incite responsive feelings of unhappiness and helplessness in those seeking to be of support. Yet this is a time requiring self-giving love, a time when the bereaved may be emotionally incapable of giving appreciative responses, and it is a time when the caring community must be prepared to stay on call and in touch, offering extended supportive services, as needed.

¹⁸Gene Outka, Agape: An Ethical Analysis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 208.

Characteristics of the Caring Community

In order to express agape toward persons in grief, the church must demonstrate a caring, supportive style of relationship that is evident in both the corporate and private lives of the membership. Dietrich Bonhoeffer identifies three basic characteristics of the caring community, the ministries of listening, helpfulness, and bearing one another's burdens, as necessary services to be performed in the Christian fellowship.¹⁹

Listening.

Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His word but also lends us His ear.²⁰

Listening is one of the most valuable services one person can render to another. In this listening more than just hearing the sound of the other's words is necessary. Listening means being preoccupied for the moment with the other person's thoughts and feelings. In this listening, we will be more than passive hearers but active listeners, reflecting back and checking out what is being expressed to clarify understanding and promote further communication. Such listening affirms the speaker by strengthening self-

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 97-103.

²⁰Bonhoeffer, 97.

esteem and nurturing supportive relationships within the community. This ministry of listening promotes an environment of hospitality.

Helpfulness. An attitude of willingness to be active helpers for one another is a vital mark of the caring community. Many people today have their lives scheduled so full that they are unable and unwilling to allow themselves to be interrupted by the needs of others. I have often found in the pastoral ministry that my agenda for any given day may be quickly changed by the needs and claims of others. Our agendas, whether as individuals or as a congregation, must be responsive to the needs of those whose paths cross ours. The ministry of helpfulness consists in making ourselves available when the need occurs and with the recognition that no genuine plea for assistance is beneath our role to perform.²¹

Bearing One Another's Burdens. This chapter began with the scripture: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." The ministry of bearing the burden of others is grounded in the recognition that God has born and continues to bear responsibility for the burdens of the creation. What burdens then does the caring community have to bear?

Recognizing the freedom of individuals within the community can become a burden when the freedom of one

²¹Bonhoeffer, 99-100.

collides with the freedom of another. In other words, how does the community handle conflict? The fact that there are various levels of strength and weakness within the community further complicates the issue. Bearing one another is the service of accepting each member of the community and not violating the personality of a person whose freedom collides with that of another. The community will be called upon to bear the burden of persons who abuse their freedom, who commit sin, or who seek to disrupt the fellowship. When this happens, the community is called upon to suffer this burden without judgment and with loving support and forgiveness. "As Christ bore and received us as sinners so we in his fellowship may bear and receive sinners into the fellowship of Jesus Christ through the forgiving of sins."²²

The congregation that manifests these three services through its members to one another, and through the same members in their daily lives apart from the activities of the congregation, is becoming a powerful environment of nurture and support for positive human growth, and especially for persons in grief.

²²Bonhoeffer, 102.

CHAPTER 4

MINISTERING IN THE PRESENCE OF GRIEF

A little girl came home from a neighbor's house where her little friend had died.

"Why did you go?" questioned her father.

"To comfort her mother," said the child.

"What could you do to comfort her?"

"I climbed into her lap and cried with her."¹

The Christian community has a unique role and opportunity to provide comfort to persons experiencing loss and grief. The members and clergy form a supportive network for persons within the membership and for those who first seek the church at such a crisis time, and the fellowship holds certain commitments in common. It is a group that is socially and psychologically interdependent with a common commitment to God, to love of neighbor, and to certain humane values. At best the congregation is characterized by friendship, compassion and genuine concern for one another.

For the congregation to be effective in its ministry in loss and grief situations, it must seek to communicate in its life style the living presence of Jesus, "...and lo, I am with you always."² Especially in times of loss and grief the congregation is called upon to be the physical expression

¹R. Scott Sullender, Grief and Growth (New York: Paulist Press, 1972) 116.

²Matthew 28:20.

of the presence of God, of love, of hope, of faith, of compassion through the friend's dark hours of pain. The members of the congregation must communicate that they, as a body and as individuals, will be dependable, available when called upon, and prepared to do whatever becomes necessary to keep that commitment.

This overall attitude will be present in the work of laity and clergy alike, as each member of the fellowship responds in love to the needs of persons. This is the nature of Christ's community - to be present, to stand beside one another when one suffers. Whatever the circumstances causing the pain, Christians are called to minister: when a spouse commits suicide, when a job is lost, when a teenager overdoses, when one drives while under the influence and the result is accident or death, when infidelity leads to divorce, when a baby is born with birth defects, when stress and greed lead to imprisonment,...the list of needs goes on and will be found both within and without the church community. And the caring community, the Body of Christ, is called to minister there.

This is a very special ministry that must be learned. Attitudes are nurtured and developed through training and experience. The Church must plan carefully if it seeks to be effective in ministry in loss and grief. It must educate the congregation about the psychological and theological issues involved in grief, and it must supplement that education with

opportunities for persons to become directly involved in giving supportive services to those in grief.

Each congregation will need to identify its primary strengths and needs, and to develop a strategy of ministry appropriate to its situation and resources. It is the intent of this last chapter to suggest some specific ways that a congregation can develop its ministry to persons in grief. I would not propose establishing a new church committee or special program, but instead I believe that the local congregation can deepen and expand the total nurturing environment by incorporating this ministry into the preaching and worship, teaching and nurture, and service and outreach of its current structure.

Grief Ministry Through Preaching and Worship

Preaching presents the pastor a unique opportunity to be supportive of persons in their grief by influencing the whole congregation to consider the many feelings and needs connected with the experience. Preaching related to the issues of loss and grief serves to help the listeners grow in the totality of their faith, and to prepare themselves for the inevitable times of loss life brings to all.

Each yearly schedule of preaching needs to include such issues as the role of human emotions in the Christian life, stages in the process of grief, how loss impacts our lives, understanding suffering and the nature of God as love.

Public worship services or other formal gatherings give an opportunity to recognize other types of loss besides death -- when members move away, when children leave home for college or marriage or work, or when church staff retire or leave.

Timing is an important issue in the task of preparing a sermon, and selection of a theme should include an awareness of what is happening in the life of the parish. For example, when a young wife and mother suddenly dies and her death is uppermost in the minds of the members is not the time to offer a carefully reasoned sermon on the nature of God's love and of undeserved suffering in the world. To do so would prompt the listeners to repress or deny the grief they are feeling. It would be the occasion to speak about the legitimacy of the feelings that accompany grief, honestly and realistically acknowledging the pain that the young woman's death brings to the membership. Identifying the pain can help people manage it in more healthful ways. The caring congregation will be able to accept without judgment or discomfort that sometimes persons will cry during a worship service. Hopefully, an honest and open acceptance of human feelings will produce a climate where persons are neither embarrassed to shed tears nor uncomfortable when others cry.

Preaching which examines the issues of loss and suffering needs to be realistic about the finitude of human life. The following excerpt from a sermon I preached on "Finding

Meaning In Life" brought forth a reaction from a member that surprised even me; her words seemed to express the feelings of many when she remarked, "Thanks for being honest."

The fourth guideline in the process of finding meaning in life is to make friends with death and pain rather than running from them. Our attitude toward death is one of the most important in our lives. In fact, it may be the key to how we learn to really live. We need to put death in its rightful context; remember, death is not a failure or a sentence we get for failing life. Death is not a disease. We are grateful for all modern medicine does for us, but it only prolongs life, it does not cure death. We are all terminal! Our death is our natural inheritance in this life.

Preaching that fails to be clear about the reality of loss is less than honest with the people who struggle with the pain and with the Biblical record of loss experienced by some of the most faithful of God's people. Just as preaching needs to be realistic about loss, so it also needs to be realistic about the nature of Christian hope. Christian hope is essentially a promise that we are never separated from the love of God - a hope that invites us to live with joy in this world despite our losses.³

The public ministry of funerals represents a special challenge for the congregation and pastor. Pastors should encourage their church members to view funerals as very important times when the supportive community's presence is made visible. Some members question the appropriateness of attending a service held for one who was not a close personal friend

³Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, All Our Losses, All Our Grievs (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 159.

or may not feel it is as important to attend a service held in a special funeral chapel as it is to attend one held in the church, but when I am called to lead the service for a parishioner (or even a relative of one of our members), our congregation is encouraged to attend. Their visible presence witnesses to the Christian community's caring for persons in their times of grief.

Preparations for funerals should be guided by two primary directives: 1) funerals are for the living and therefore are part of the grief process and should and can enhance the expression of grief in a supportive community; and 2) funeral services should maintain a balance between remembering and hoping. The service is part of the building of a collective memory and provides a ritual for recognizing that an ending has occurred. Hope and resurrection should be proclaimed but not at the expense of denying or ignoring the human condition of real loss. A frank recognition of the pain and sorrow of this occasion, appropriate remembering, and the introduction of God as Fellow-Sufferer, present with us, should be the key elements of each funeral.⁴

Grief Ministry Through Christian Education

The Christian education structures of the local con-

⁴Mitchell and Anderson, 140-145.

gregation provide opportunities for persons of all ages to develop an understanding about the impact of loss and grief. Students and teachers of every church school class can relate to these issues in ways appropriate for each grade level.

Because loss is a common experience which begins very early in life, it is important to include information about it in the standard curriculum. Special teacher training sessions can be focused on the subject. Such training would involve identifying the types of loss likely to occur in each age level, such as normal developmental changes which involve risk and change. It would also consider the potential affects upon a child of more traumatic losses (the death of a parent or grandparent, divorce, moving to a new community) so that teachers would be able to respond with sensitivity when students share their griefs and concerns.

Understanding the process of grief and the emotions involved is also important for teachers if they are to help students accept and understand unrecognized feelings which may underlie disruptive behaviors and might be related to loss, anticipated loss, or even imagined loss.

In younger church school classes teachers could infuse a new sensitivity into the student-teacher relationship, encouraging the recognition and discussion of grief feelings. If the children are acting out the parables of Jesus about the lost coin, lost sheep, or lost son, why not take time to experience and talk about what it is like to lose something

before starting to celebrate the finding of the lost object or person?

Youth and adult classes often utilize special series focused on a specific issue. Junior and senior high groups could include a series on Death and Dying. Such a series might include field trips to a funeral home, hospital, and sessions with a doctor, lawyer, psychologist and pastor.

Adult classes which enjoy reading and discussion of books on special issues could have a series using books like Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People,⁵ Westberg's Good Grief,⁶ or Weatherhead's classic The Will of God.⁷

Studies of this nature help adults discover they are not alone in their feelings about loss and help to develop more supportive relationships within the community.

The key issues for grief ministry through Christian nurture are: 1) communicating to children, youth and adults that the Church is honest about life and death, accepting the joy and the pain; 2) Christians accept the reality of all our feelings in order to help us understand ourselves and others; and 3) the Church is a supportive, caring community reflecting God's love.

⁵Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Shoken Books, 1981).

⁶Granger Westberg, Good Grief (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1962).

⁷Leslie D. Weatherhead, The Will of God (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1944).

Grief Ministry Through Lay Caring Teams

An effective grief ministry involves the energy and time of the pastor in the ministries of preaching and nurture, but even more it requires many hours of person-to-person attention and pastoral caring. At any given time, even in a small congregation, there will be several persons at various stages in the grief process. If a pastor had all the time wanted, still the pastoral care given to those in grief would not fill all the needs, for most persons require a variety of relationships to help them through grief.

More and more congregations are discovering the benefits of using lay persons in pastoral caring roles which were once thought to be the sole domain of the clergy. The high success rate of self-help groups like AA is helping spread the philosophy that persons who have successfully survived a significant life crisis can be very effective with others facing the same or similar crises. Most churches have widows and widowers who have made healthy adjustments to their loss and who are potential members for an effective team of caring, helping lay persons. The time a pastor spends developing such a resource as a Lay Caring Team will greatly expand the congregation's ministry. The same concept can be applied to other types of loss such as divorce, job loss and retirement.⁸

⁸Sullender, 134.

When lay team members discover the various needs of a particular person, the members can call upon the resources of others within the congregation, thus making ever more visible the presence of the caring community. The recruitment of persons to provide food, child care, transportation, house cleaning, or serving a meal following the funeral to the immediate family are all forms of support which caring congregations can extend at times of loss.

Principles to observe in recruiting persons for a Lay Caring Team include: the individuals need to be in a good state of emotional health and well-being; they must possess personal skills in relating to others with sensitivity; they must be committed to the task, available and willing to devote the time necessary to learn and to serve; they should train together with the pastor. Teams should avail themselves of training resources offered within the larger community. (Members in Southern California will find The Institute on Health and Wholeness at Claremont a valuable resource.)

Team members must be clear about the limitations of their personal resources, and also well informed regarding the resources of the pastor, congregation, and other helping professionals within their community.

The circumstances of team training may vary, but the content must include a basic review of good communication skills (active listening), understanding the dynamics of the loss-grief process, and recognizing what constitutes appro-

priate and effective help.

Mitchell and Anderson discuss four different needs of grievors that it is essential a lay team understand: the need for intervention, for support, for encouragement, and for reintegration.⁹

The term 'intervention' literally means 'coming between someone and their problem,' that is, taking over. In the early period of the grief process there is often the need for the grievd to be relieved of some of the normal expectations and duties of living so that they have time and space for their grief. Some persons will need more help than others; some may resist any help at all. Basically, intervention means giving temporary assistance to people with the ordinary tasks of daily living: providing food and daily services, protecting the bereaved from undue pressures from others, and helping them sort out priorities and avoid premature decisions that might later prove harmful.

The need for support is appropriately met through reflective, responsive listening, without attempting to provide answers to the predictable "Why?" questions, without filling silences or attempting to soften the strong emotions of the bereaved, and listening without judgment or condescension. Another important element in support is learning to avoid premature comfort that could effectively block expression of

⁹Mitchell and Anderson, 112-132.

feelings and could later have serious consequences, such as "You only make it worse by crying so much." Assurances of the continued support and presence of the comforter, "Call me, I will come," is most helpful.

The ministry of encouragement involves helping the bereaved catalogue realistic and precious memories of the deceased, as a means of gaining emotional release. This begins with the preparations for the funeral or memorial service, but needs to be continued as a means of accepting the reality of the loss and gaining relief from the pain. The lay team member will encourage the telling of memories.

The need for reintegration is crucial, and the caring church community will actively seek ways to draw the bereaved into the mainstream of congregational life, being careful that social groupings do not segregate persons by marital status. The bereaved need to resume previously fulfilling activities and relationships, to begin new life patterns appropriate to their newly defined needs, and to explore life and faith's meanings in new ways in view of their loss.

Grief Ministry Through Support Groups

The traditional congregation usually functions from a foundation of small groups of persons elected or organized to perform functional tasks. Although primarily task oriented, the groups provide opportunity for personal sharing of feelings and concerns. When personal needs of group members are heard and affirmed, the group develops strong bonds of commit-

ment and tasks are completed with creativity and sensitivity.

It is increasingly common for small groups to be formed to specifically focus upon mutual needs of the members. During the past year I have participated in two groups designed for persons who had experienced the recent death of someone who had been very close to them, usually a spouse. My wife and I shared as co-leaders for the group. The purpose of the group was to provide a safe environment where caring and confrontation could help persons work through their grief and examine the feelings and experiences which often accompany a significant loss. The sessions included a time of sharing of helpful materials and resources and a time of reflective response to that input. We specifically used Westberg's ten stages of grief¹⁰ as a basic educational tool. Members of the group brought books, poems and other articles they had found personally helpful to share with the group. This often served as an effective entry into intimate, open expression of feelings which had previously been difficult to verbalize. The materials provided objective content on the issues and the sharing process enabled participants to identify their specific needs, express and accept their feelings, and create and integrate realistic memories of their deceased loved ones.

Howard Clinebell suggests that a grief recovery group be composed of a minimum of three and a maximum of twelve

¹⁰Westberg, Good Grief.

persons.¹¹ Our group was composed of four persons and we found the smaller number an effective size, enabling each member to freely participate.

The group was promoted primarily through one-to-one invitation. Although it was advertised in congregational mailings, no person responded without a personal contact and invitation. Perhaps the stoic tradition in our society and our churches inhibits persons from public participation in a support group. To attend might give an impression that "he or she is not doing well with their grief," seems a common fear.

The group was also advertised as a place where persons not dealing with an immediate grief could learn about the grief process so they could be more supportive of others who were experiencing a loss. The receptive and enthusiastic witness of one such group member who came seeking resources to help her neighbors led a recent widow to attend. And when a second group was formed three months after the first group concluded, that widow became the main recruiter of others for the series.

It was important that transportation was offered for new members for we found that it was often difficult for a person in grief to make that solo trip to participate in the group.

¹¹Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., "How to Set Up a Grief Recovery Group." Xeroxed material. Claremont, CA: School of Theology, n.d.

Even this limited experience with grief support groups has proven valuable and desirable for our congregation. While the pastor is the identifiable leader of the group, it is really a mutual-help experience. The group not only facilitates the healing of grief wounds for the participants, it also motivates them to reach out to others in grief. It increases the self-confidence of the members and frees them to be more responsive. Our congregation has had a small but significant beginning in developing a grief ministry that enhances our identity as a caring community, willing to face openly the tragedies of life and to provide avenues of help and healing.

Grief Ministry File

The intentional follow-up of persons who have suffered significant loss over an extended period of two or three years is another important dimension of the church's grief ministry. This work can be coordinated by creating a grief-file. The file should include the name of the bereaved, the date and nature of the loss, a record of services given by the pastor, by the Lay Caring Team, and by other groups or individuals within the congregation, and significant dates (the birthdays of the deceased and of the bereaved, wedding anniversaries, etc.) The file is checked at the beginning of each month so that appropriate times can be recognized by a personal contact or letter, thus providing support for persons when the painful waves of grief feelings are most likely

to recur. It is a profound comfort to know that others have not forgotten your loss.

A Closing Word

They have said of Jesus that he was "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He was also a man of great love, compassion and commitment. The two go hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other, and the two are tied together by faith.¹²

The motive underlying this project is a conviction that the Christian ministry in local congregations must be challenged to take more seriously the impact of loss experiences upon the lives of parishioners, and the untapped resources of ministry that those parishioners can be for others.

To meet this challenge, the congregation is called to recognize and embrace the presence of grief.

¹²Sullender, 215.

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